

**The Church of the Good Shepherd**  
Lexington, Kentucky  
Sermon for November 20, 2011 ~ Proper 29A  
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

For many years there was a television program called “To Tell the Truth.” Many of us at one time or another watched this program and know that a panel of persons is supposed to interrogate three people, all of whom claim to be the same person. During the course of the interrogation, the panelists seek to discover which of the three is really the person who has been described by the host and moderator of the program. Sometimes it is a person of some real prominence. At other times, it is a person who has achieved some obscure goal or set a record in some unusual area.

At the end of the interrogation, the “real person” is asked to stand. A great deal of suspense surrounds which one it will be and the winner of the game is determined by who recognizes the true from the false. It has always fascinated me that more often than not it is almost impossible to determine who is telling the truth, who the real celebrity is.

The parable of the basis of God’s judgment strikes me the same way. Like the TV game, the basis of judgment in the parable is truth – authenticity. Also like the game show, there is an element of surprise. But, unlike the game, the parable Jesus tells is of great significance to human life for in it there is the clue to the meaning of living faith and the promise of Christ’s kingly rule over all the nations of the world. In a poetical way, Jesus paints a picture of the standard by which we are held accountable.

**Distasteful and difficult as the subject may seem, the concept of judgment is a feature of life with which we must contend not just in “the end” but every single day of our lives.**

People for generations have built a false theology on this parable and used it to judge and damn other people. They have read into it their own misguided need to feel superior to their neighbors. But when we really study the parable, we see that Christ is the judge here and only he sees the heart. His judgment is unlike human judgment. While the last part of this parable out of the original language and context confuses the issue, properly understood, the parable is consistent with the God whom Jesus called “my Father”, the God of love. This parable is intended to provide insight into the basis of accountability when we stand before Christ, the King and Righteous Judge, whenever that may be.

Judgment takes place daily, in our daily actions, in our daily experiences, in our daily frustrations, in our daily victories, and in our daily defeats. Christ the King focuses on simple, daily acts of love as the basis upon which judgment is made. The nations of the world are compared to sheep and goats. In the Palestine of Jesus time, the sheep are white and the goats are black, easily distinguished one from another. Each evening, the shepherd must separate them because sheep prefer open air at night while the goats need a more sheltered sleeping arrangement. It is a daily thing. In the parable, it is the nations of the world that are gathered before the King and must be sorted out – judged.

Where do you suppose our own nation stands right about now? Like most nations, there are some pretty striking contrasts to the love of God. Just as Christ does not wait until the end to dispatch his messengers to deliver his gospel, neither does he wait until the end to let his judgment be known. Judgment Day is every day.

**Then, we see from the parable that one of the characteristics of a true saint is that the saint forgets the self in service to God and neighbor.** Those who help the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, and prisoner are uncalculating in their actions. They help because, for whatever reason, they are compelled to do so. It does not occur to them **not** to help. Whereas, on the other hand, the attitude of those who come up short is, “But we thought it was only some ordinary person on the other side of the tracks who was not worth helping. We didn’t realize there would be a big payoff if we went over and helped.”

There are still those in our world who will help if they are given praise and thanks and publicity. But to help like that is more about pandering self-esteem than responding to the love of God. The help we see as the basis of our accountability before Christ is the help that is given for no reason other than for the sake of someone in need.

We just celebrated the feast day of Martin of Tours on November 8. Martin was a Roman soldier and a Christian. One cold winter day, as he was entering a city, a beggar stopped him and asked him for alms. Martin had no money, but the beggar was blue and shivering with cold, so Martin gave him what he had. He took off his soldier’s cloak, cut it in two, and gave half of it to the beggar. That night, Martin had a dream. In it he saw the heavenly places and all the angels with Jesus in the midst of them wearing half of a Roman soldier’s cloak. One of the angels said to him, “Master, why are you wearing that tattered old cloak?” Jesus answered, “My servant Martin gave it to me.”

When we come to the point where we learn the generosity that without calculation helps others in the simplest things, wherein we find that we have actually forgotten ourselves and all selfish interests, then we will know the joy of helping the King of Kings himself.

**Finally, the great good news on this festival of the Reign of Christ, so beautifully expressed in this parable, is this: there are surprises in store for everyone in the Kingdom of God.**

Both those at the right hand and those at the left hand find themselves astonished at what is happening. From the sea of faces, each one is singled out in turn. Each one is not asked about his creed or her style of worship, or their standing in the community. Each one is asked, “What have you done for the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, and imprisoned people you see every day of your life? What has been your response to the love which I have lavished on you?”

Surprise is a very real and necessary part of religion and human life in general. Corita Kent, a Roman Catholic nun whose art has inspired me, once said, “To believe in God is to know that all the rules are fair and that there will be wonderful surprises.” What would our world be like if everyone in all the nations had a sense of the presence of the God who is always taking us by surprise. A great prayer contains this striking sentence, “If we have come into the service of worship thinking to leave just as we came, visit us with a divine surprise.” Whenever we stand under the judgment of God, or communicate with God through prayer or song, or serve God by helping someone else, watch out! God will surprise us every time. The trouble with most of us is that we’ve insulated ourselves against any kind of surprise by too many layers of safe, dull, tired, lifeless, orthodoxy.

The Kingdom of God is full of surprises. Perhaps that is one of the reasons Pope Pius IX proclaimed this feast in 1925, in the midst of growing nationalism and secularism. The First World War had ended only a few years earlier. Mussolini had been head of Italy for three years. A rabble rouser named Adolph Hitler had been out of jail for a year and his Nazi party was growing in popularity, and the world lay in a great Depression. In such a time, Pius IX asserted that, nevertheless, Christ is still the Sovereign of the Uni-

verse. The feast is supposed to be the Church's reminder that there are going to be some surprises on Judgment Day.

The God of the Bible, cover to cover and not just in this one parable, does not judge on the basis of how much power and prestige, how many arrows in our quiver, chariots and horses in our stables, or nuclear weapons in our arsenal. God does not judge on the basis of who we know, how much influence we have, what kind of car we drive, or who is in charge of the financial markets, or who is occupying them at the moment. Our God judges on the basis of how we treat the most vulnerable and marginalized members of our society and how we are sharing the love that has been given to us.

Back of it all there is Love Divine. It is this love that calls for the real Christian to stand up in every age. For it is this love that created us and all that is and redeems and judges us daily. The parable speaks for itself; whoever loves with the love of God, lives enduringly in God our Heavenly Father.